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The Fact of the Given From a Realist Idealist Perspective

Abstract

In his well-known *Mind and World* and in line with Wilfrid Sellars’ (1991) or “that great foe of ‘immediacy’” (ibid., 127) Hegel, McDowell claims that “when Evans argues that judgments of experience are based on non-conceptual content, he is falling into a version of the Myth of the Given” (1996, 114). In this paper, on the basis of a) a mainly Kantian ‘realist idealist’ world view and b) an explication of Kant’s concept of the “given manifold” (CPR, e.g. B138), I will argue that Kant and Evans (1982, chs. 5.1–5.2) were indeed mistaken in their versions of the given, but that Sellars and his student McDowell were even more mistaken and that, in the end, there would appear to be a non-conceptual and (thus) non-propositional given in perceptual experience from which we unconsciously and automatically infer to our first perceptual beliefs.

1. Defining ‘Realist Idealism’

The following discussion is based on a certain ontological and epistemological or ‘epistemontological’ world view. Before starting the discussion proper and in order to prevent confusion at a later point, I will first introduce the three main theses of my respective and largely Kantian (CPR) but also Berkeleyian (PHK) world view of ‘realist idealism’ (for a much more in-depth discussion of this, see Flock draft version 2.2). First and contrary to direct realism and sense-datum theory which are both *physical realist* positions, realist idealism is a *physical anti-realist* or, more specifically, a ‘*noumenal realist*’ position – i.e. it proposes that it is not ‘the’ physical world which is real, but rather Kant’s noumenal world of things in themselves which, if one were to take into account the early Wittgenstein’s claim that “The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (TLP, §1.1), one could perhaps also refer to as ‘facts in themselves.’ Furthermore and due to also borrowing from Berkeley, realist idealism also claims that minds are real which, given that brains are physical, that everything physical is regarded as anti-real and that something about us has got to be real, is only consistent.

Secondly and contrary to direct-realism but in line with sense-datum theory, realist idealism is not a ‘*direct objectivist*’ but a ‘*direct subjectivist*’ position – i.e. it proposes that our direct or immediate perceptual awareness is never of something real (i.e. of something that exists ontically objectively or mind- or subject-independently) but always of something anti-real (i.e. of something that exists ontically subjectively or mind- or subject-dependently).

Thirdly, more in line with direct realism and contrary to or at least less in line with sense-datum theory and even though it is in the end *both* of the following theses that realist idealism endorses due to regarding the physical as part of the greater realm of the mental,

direct realism is more specifically a '*direct physicalist*' and not so much or only more generally a '*direct mentalist*' position – i.e. it maintains that our direct or immediate perceptual awareness is more specifically of something physical, more generally of something mental and most certainly not of something non-physical as sense-datum theorists would claim.

This, in essence, is also what Kant proposed in somewhat different terms. Contrary to Kant, however, I speak of “realist idealism” as opposed to “transcendental idealism” (CPR, A368–370) mainly to fight off the misconception that idealism is opposed to realism. Kantian and even Berkeleyian idealism, however, are ontologically realist positions too since, even though they do not regard the physical as real, they clearly affirm that there is something which is real. Thus “realist idealism.”

2. Kant's and Evan's Fundamental Mistake: The Notion of Given or Perceived Objects

In the very first paragraph of the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant links the given to the four other key concepts of sensibility/Sinnlichkeit, understanding/Verstand, intuitions/Anschauungen and concepts/Begriffe via the following claim: “[B]y means of sensibility objects are *given* to us, and it alone supplies us with *intuitions*. Through *understanding*, on the other hand, objects are *thought*, and from it arise *concepts*” (A19/B33).

In other words and in order to delve a little bit deeper into those terms and definitions: Kant defines “intuitions and concepts” as constituting “the elements of all our cognition” (A50/B71) and as belonging to the wider category of sometimes given (A50/B74) “presentations/Vorstellungen” (A56/B80). Sensibility and understanding a.k.a. “spontaneity”

(B69), “spontaneity of concepts” (A50/B71) or “spontaneity of thought” (A68/B93) are regarded as the faculties that produce the respective elements. It is also worth noting that Kant defines “(empirical) intuition” as “tak[ing] place only insofar as the [sensible!] object is given to us” (A19/B33, addition myself) or as “refer[ring] to the object” (A20/B34; also see B72) – i.e. as something like ‘intuition as,’ in order to allude to Wittgenstein’s “seeing as” (PI, II, XI, 193ff). This definition, however, in my opinion clashes with Kant’s claims that empirical intuitions (A20/B34, A50/B74) are produced purely by sensibility (A19/B33) or that they are not a “cognition through concepts” (A68/B93) insofar as the latter definitions of intuition as taking place *after* the objects are given to us would rather suggest the involvement of the faculty of understanding, the ensuing process of thought and the elements or presentations of concepts. Yet another problem with Kant’s concept of intuition is that Kant also commits the mistake of conflating intuitions as processes with intuitions as products (e.g. A19/B33). My solution for these two confluences is to explicate intuition as an understanding based process of intuition as.

In order to return to the originally intended topic though, we see that Kant once again reaffirms the claim that “Through receptivity an object is *given* to us” (A50/B74) in the *Transcendental Analytic* and before suggesting to “give the name *sensibility* to our mind’s *receptivity*, [i.e., to its ability] to receive presentations insofar as it is affected in [p. 57:] some manner” (A51/B75) – i.e. primarily by things in themselves.

That claim of objects or certain presentations being given to us, however, is very problematic. First of all, it is ambivalent since “object” could be used either for real or non-real objects and since Kant himself distinguished between “object as *appearance*” (cf. A20/B34: “The undetermined object of an empirical intuition is called *appearance*”) and “object as object *in itself*” (B68) only a few pages earlier and since it would actually make

sense to interpret “object” as a real thing in itself if “given” were to be interpreted as something like “rendered.” Since that does not seem to be the proper interpretation of the verb “given,” since the given is generally to be understood as mental content or more specifically as *exclusively non-conceptual and (thus) non-propositional mental content* and since things or objects in themselves do not qualify as *any* sort of mental content, it seems fairly safe to say that Kant is talking about objects as appearances here.

Secondly and more importantly, to claim that receptivity/sensibility gives us objects as appearance is simply a mistake since the given must not feature any conceptual content and since, in my opinion, the identification of something as an object already requires conceptual content. As such, it is also the first part of the famous passage “Without sensibility no object would be given to us; and without understanding no object would be thought” (A51/B75) that is mistaken. To be more explicit about that: Kant apparently thinks that conceptual content is only introduced when the “undetermined object” of appearance is determined with the aid of understanding, thought and concepts or when an according “manifold of the appearance” or “manifold in experience” is “ordered in certain relations” (A20/B34) in a likewise manner and with the aid of a number of syntheses (B129ff or A98ff). So according to Kant, an object as appearance or an according manifold of appearances that I later identify as a laptop or, additionally, as hands, a table, pencils, a calendar, a table, etc. is, at the time of ‘purely’ or ‘undeterminedly seeing’ these objects, supposed to still be non-conceptual content. A generally identical notion would also appear to have been entertained by Evans who mentions a “pure case” of perception where “the subject does not recognize the [object as a] cat, and has no information about it” (1982, ch. 5.1, 121, addition myself; also cf. Sellars’ “inner episodes” (1991, 140)).

That notion, however, is a mistake since the use of the basic concepts of *unity* and

separation are already required to ‘perceive’ or rather *conceive of* objects which are by default understood as a unity that is separated from its surroundings. What is all the more astounding about Kant committing that mistake is that he even explicitly mentions the “concept of divisibility” or that “all judgments are functions of unity among our presentations” (A69/B94). Apparently though it did not occur to him that these concepts or functions are required for the identification or construction of objects or that the thought “This is an object” or “this object” already is a by default conceptual content containing judgment or perceptual belief even if the object is or should remain undetermined. In other words: Even undetermined physical objects are never perceived via sensibility but always intuited as or conceived, i.e. constructed via understanding, thought and concepts.

3. Explicating Kant’s Given Manifold

Kant’s given manifold which builds on the mistaken notion of given objects could nevertheless serve as a given if all conceptual content is removed from it. This is why I explicate the manifold in the following manner and in accordance with Kant’s general idea of the manifold being “given in the mind—viz., without spontaneity” (B68): Think of the given ‘Kantio-Flockian manifold’ in perception as something like a newborn’s almost entire experience of the physical world: It perceives a manifold of appearances (colors, sounds, etc.) but would initially most likely even fail at making out objects within that manifold that we most likely could make out even if we were unable to determine those objects by “bring[ing] them under concepts” (A51/B75). That at least – i.e. completely independent and devoid of any conceptual content – is what a given manifold or any perceptually given must be, because otherwise, the given would indeed be nothing but a myth. To rephrase that as an argument:

P1: The given must only result from or include sensibility and its products; i.e. it must not in

any way result from or include understanding (including intuition as) and its products. P2: Concepts or conceptual content result from understanding. C: Therefore, the given must not result from or include any concepts or conceptual content.

4. The Usual Omission of Unconscious Inferences

There are a number of very understandable objections against the existence of such non-conceptual content such as the following one by Sellars: “There is no more such a thing as a non-symbolic noticing that something is red, than there is a non-symbolic saying that something is red” (1991, 336). In that, Sellars is of course correct: We can neither notice or intuit something as red nor speak of red without concepts. The latter is also true for non-conceptual content which somewhat ironically or paradoxically requires conceptual content to be spoken of, thought about or even intuited as non-conceptual content (if you will and since this occurred to me in a conversation with Géza Kállay in 2016, call this the ‘Flock-Kállay paradox of non-conceptual content’). Sellars, however, is sorely mistaken in inferring from by default conceptual intuiting, noticing or seeing something as red to the conclusion that the given or non-conceptual content is a myth since it is easily conceivable that light of a certain wavelength is first given to us via pure sensibility and that, after bringing that still non-conceptual content under concepts via understanding, we later see something in the manifold as red.

What Sellars, McDowell and other proponents of the myth of the given seem to have ignored, in other words, is the possibility of unconscious and automatic inferences (cf. Helmholtz 1867, ch. 26, or Evans 2008 for an overview over recent developments) that, together with concepts, are used to see something in the given manifold of appearance as red, as an object or as “these hands here.” Adding such unconscious inferences to the picture also

explains why we are generally unable to hold on to or maybe even to notice non-conceptual content as such – because non-conceptual content is automatically transformed into actually mixed conceptual content without us ever being consciously aware of those processes (if you will, call this the ‘Flock-Kállay obscuration of non-conceptual content’). Note furthermore that one of the perhaps most obvious confirmations for the existence of unconscious inferences is that you automatically understood these words all this time without needing to consciously think about how to associate those signs or sounds with meaning. [p. 58:]

5. Three Additional Sellarsian Myths about the Given

In this section I will expound on section 4 by taking a closer look at three more specific Sellarsian myths about the given. The first of these myths can be found in deVries’ (2016, sect. 4) reconstruction of the general Sellarsian argument against the given and goes as follows: “3. The doctrine of the given is that any empirical knowledge *that p* requires some (or is itself) basic, that is, epistemically independent, knowledge (*that g, h, i, ...* .” Sellars seems to be taking that ‘doctrine’ from some of his contemporaries who apparently suffered from the mistaken notion that the given has or could have propositional form or content (“knowledge”). That, however, is utter nonsense that neither Kant’s nor my own notion of the given manifold would support since the given must be entirely non-conceptual, since propositions can only be conceptual, and since the given can therefore not have propositional form or content. Since knowledge is propositional, the given can therefore also not be knowledge. Sellars, in other words, makes the mistake of merely refuting some pseudo-given instead of going the hard way of trying to refute Kant’s rather well-conceived given.

The second, related and more than just Sellarsian myth is that “4. Inferential relations are always between items with propositional form” (2016, sect. 4). Here I once again need to

point to Helmholtz (1867, ch. 26) who had the presence of mind to enlarge the ordinary picture of by default conscious inferences by counseling that we should also admit according unconscious processes into the category of inferences. In a likewise manner, I also think that it would be a huge mistake to believe that inferences involve only items with propositional form or content since perceptual beliefs such as “Here there are hands” or simply “This is a physical object” could just as well be regarded as conclusions that are inferred from the manifold of appearance (= non-propositional ‘premise’ no1) and concepts (= non-propositional ‘premise’ no2) and by means of a logical application of the latter to the former.

The third and once again related Sellarsian myth at least as far as Kant or myself are concerned is the absurd notion that the given somehow supports the existence of “non-inferential knowledge” (Sellars 1991, 128). There is no such thing as non-inferential knowledge or non-inferential beliefs since all beliefs, including ‘knowledge-beliefs,’ are conclusions that result from by default inferential justification. Neither do, as pointed out before, Kant or myself claim that the mere “sensing of sense contents” (ibid., 128) or the given amounts to knowledge since the given must be entirely non-conceptual and since knowledge, beliefs or propositions clearly are conceptual. So much for the disenchantment of three additional Sellarsian myths about the given.

6. Conclusion

With a by default non-conceptual and thus non-propositional given in perception re-established, it is not only Kant or Evans that generally prevail over Sellars or McDowell in this respect. Furthermore, philosophers can also start to add mere coherentism (cf. Steup 2016, sect. 3.2) as well as traditional foundationalism (cf. Steup 2016, sect. 3.1) to the dustbin of history, because if that non-propositional given as well as non-propositional concepts are

necessary ‘premises’ in the by default inferential justification of our first perceptual beliefs, then a respective version of moderate foundationalism according to which some by default propositional beliefs do not depend on other beliefs for their justification is pretty much the only remaining option.

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